a SELF-DEFENSE STUDY GUIDE for TRANS WOMEN*

BECAUSE THE STUFF THAT WORKS FOR OTHER PEOPLE

DOESN'T WORK FOR US.

*** and Gender Non-Conforming / Nonbinary AMAB folks**

Written by TransFighters, Oakland
Based on generous community members' advice

Background paintings: inoPoGu

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PREFACE

This study guide was created out of stories of lived experiences from a handful of trans women* (White, Black, Indigenous, and Asian), who used strategies like these to survive the 90's / 00's.

- None of this stuff worked every time, and this is just a small sample of things that CAN work.
  - Different people are more comfortable (and therefore successful) with different approaches.
- As times change, these strategies also need to change. So pick what seems useful and then invent new strategies as you go.
- Racial dynamics will play a big part in which strategies you can use, and when. Train what feels useful to you.
  - Reading this is just one step. You have to train, otherwise when life comes at you, you won't instinctively do these strategies.

A few good agreements if you're training with others:

- create an environment where people choose to join in for each activity (rather than having to choose to sit out)
  - check in with your training partners before every drill / scenario
- actually allow yourself to step away if you need a break

Roleplaying emergency scenarios can cause emotional fallout later, even if you feel fine now, so:

- include time for an emotional calm down or check-in at the end
- talk it out with friends if you experience event-looping or heavy emotions over the next few days

Chapter 1:
PEOPLE YOU CAN'T JUST TALK BACK TO

for example:

TRANSPHOBE CUSTOMERS

TERFy TEACHERS

YOUR MOM'S NEW BOYFRIEND

the DMV CLERK

... and other people who are holding power over you

Illustrations: Samantha Richardson

QUESTION:

Even if they're being an asshole, what dangers arise if you talk back to a customer? A parent? A cop?

Here's a different strategy:

- Forget trying to argue one-on-one to change their mind (they aren't going to just stop hating you).
- Instead, try to embarrass them in front of a crowd until THEY CHOOSE to backpedal.
  - If you just stand up for yourself you could get punished in ways you can't defend yourself from, so instead, try to manipulate your situation...

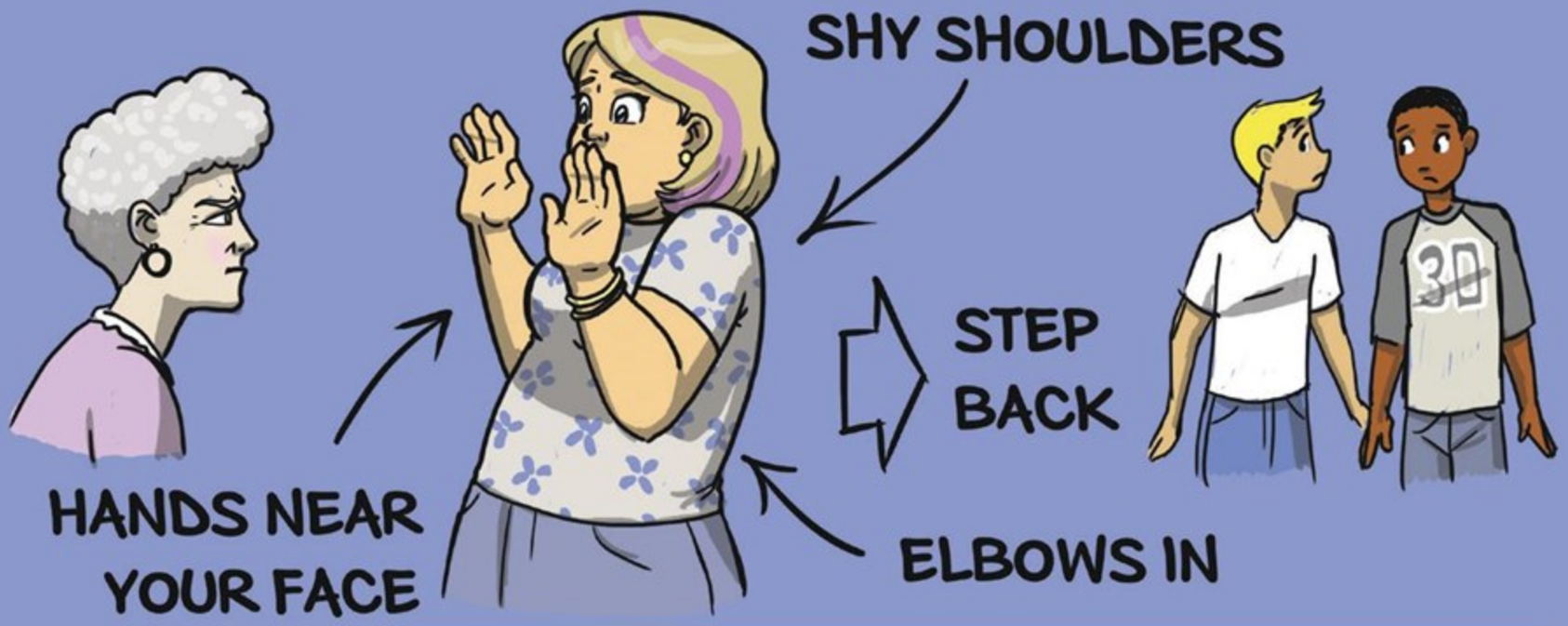
Try bringing outside attention to the thing, maybe by raising your voice and calling it out.

Depending on how you read the room, you might even try something like:

The fact is, the actual words you use are less important than making them think that bystanders will care about what you're saying.

REMEMBER:
Bystanders will NOT actually intervene. This technique is just a bluff to make the attacker choose to stop.

Using aggressive body language will open the door for them to use their power to "justifiably" punish you, so try victim body language instead:



If bystanders don't know you're trans yet, using your voice might get you into more trouble. You might have to use body language alone.

REMEMBER:
They don't care about your feelings. The goal of this strategy is to make them want to stop because they worry that OTHER PEOPLE are judging them.

TRAIN IT!

With a partner, practice this technique so that your body remembers when it happens for real.

Because running "scenarios," with real-world language, can be too triggering to do repetitively, you can use unrelated/neutral insults:

YOUR SHIRT IS GREEN! I HATE GREEN SHIRTS!
You'll also train better & longer, if you can make it fun.
PLEASE STOP INSULTING MY SHIRT!

* If you can get someone to watch you practice, ask them what worked well with your posture, movements, and voice control.

REAL TALK:

Bystanders and crowds almost always side AGAINST trans women*, even crowds of trans people. This is especially so if the crowd is white and the trans woman* is not.

This study guide suggests working in relation to bystanders & crowds, or using allies to help posture, but these are strictly BLUFFING techniques.

In emergency situations, trans women* should expect & plan for crowds & allies to let them down, or even turn against them.

Background paintings: inoPoGu

Chapter 2:
PEOPLE YOU CAN'T JUST PUNCH

for example:

CIS-WOMEN GROPERS

BUTTHEAD KIDS

HOUSELESS FOLKS
W/ UNFORTUNATE OPINIONS

ANOTHER TRANS WOMAN*

... and anytime where it would be unethical to defend yourself because of their circumstances, or if you would lose against them in court

Illustrations: Scout Tran

QUESTION:

If a cis man gropes you in a crowd and you slap him for it, what happens?

What goes differently if you slap a cis woman who groped you?

HINT: Crowds will subconsciously side against a trans woman*, especially if they call themselves trans allies.

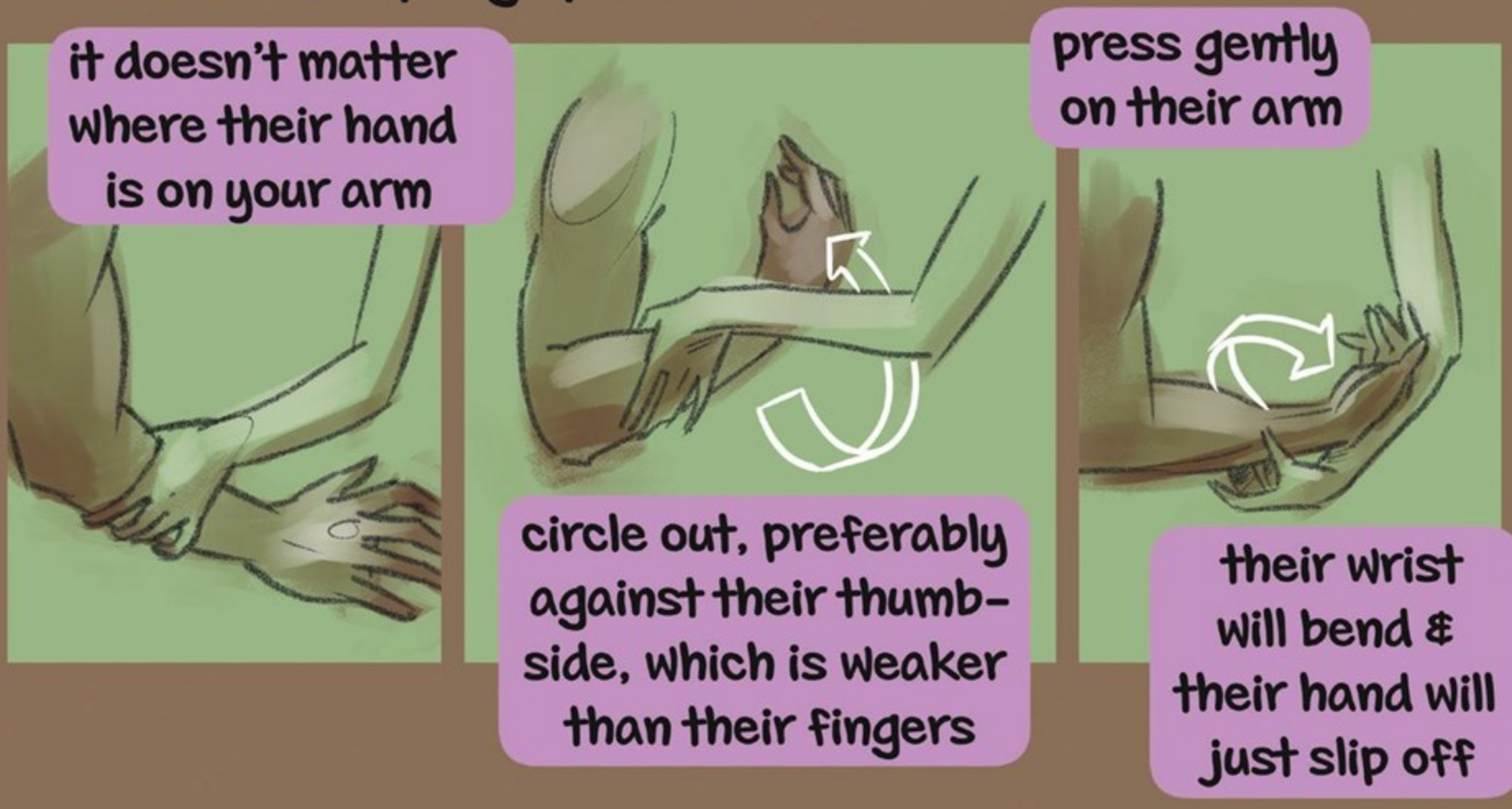
ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY:

You'll need to enforce your physical boundaries without looking like that's what you're doing.

For physical harassment that lasts longer than a moment, you may have to remove their hands from you.

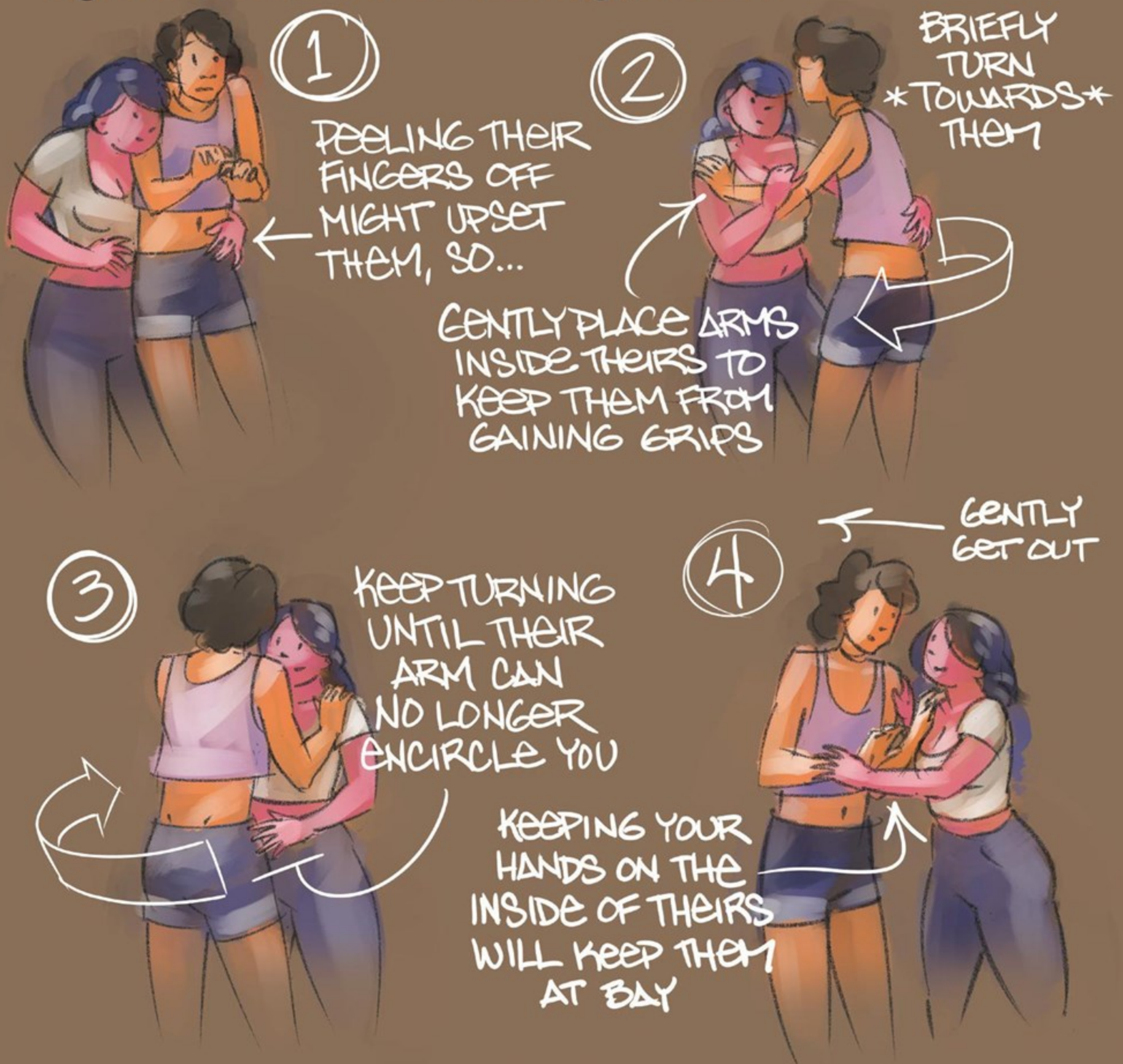
- Don't defend yourself by shoving them back, or you'll be in even more trouble with them, or with any onlookers.
- Use subtle grip breaks to re-establish your bodily autonomy.

Here's one simple grip break:


it doesn't matter where their hand is on your arm
press gently on their arm
circle out, preferably against their thumb-side, which is weaker than their fingers
their wrist will bend & their hand will just slip off

- Practice this with a friend, over and over until it's easy.
- Try making it gentler, subtler. Imagine trying to remove someone's hand without them realizing you've done it.

Try this escape with a training partner:


1
PEELING THEIR FINGERS OFF MIGHT UPSET THEM, SO...
2
BRIEFLY TURN *TOWARDS* THEM
GENTLY PLACE ARMS INSIDE THEIRS TO KEEP THEM FROM GAINING GRIPS
3
KEEP TURNING UNTIL THEIR ARM CAN NO LONGER ENCIRCLE YOU
4
GENTLY GET OUT
KEEPING YOUR HANDS ON THE INSIDE OF THEIRS WILL KEEP THEM AT BAY

For people you can talk back to without repercussion, do it!

Let them have it.

Embarrass them in front of their friends.

Tell them you're disappointed in their behavior.

Cry. Scream. Say you're contagious. Who cares.

Many harassers are opportunists, and are relying on not getting caught. Try calling it out / making a scene.

Even if you know you're alone in a building, try calling out to a friend or coworker as if they're in the next room. Call for them by name.

For women harassers, maybe try loudly male-gendering them so others can hear. Crowds only take notice if they assume that a man is the aggressor.

AFTERWARDS:

If you were alone when you were harassed, talk about the incident to your friends ASAP (with their permission).

Verbally recounting the incident might help with your event processing so you don't get stuck replaying the moment in your head.

This will start building a support base if the assaulter tries to accuse you of something later. "I Believe Survivors" was created for cis-het assaults — it doesn't go well for trans women*, even worse for BIPOC, so head off the gossip when you can.

REAL TALK:

Judges, juries, HR departments, and peer groups are very likely to rule against a trans woman*.

Good self-defense strategies can still be built while avoiding using techniques that will lead to adverse official judgements.

This does limit a trans woman's* ability to use a weapon, or to claim being sexually assaulted was their reason for defending themselves.

Background paintings: inoPoGu

Chapter 3:
OKAY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE VIOLENCE?

A.K.A. MEN WHO GET IN YOUR FACE

... especially "friends" who are bullying you

Illustrations: Daren Todd

QUESTION:

Running away from a fight is the best way to survive it.

But what happens later if you run from a school bully? A parent? A neighbor? A partner?

ONE STRATEGY:

Show that you're at least a little dangerous.

- You don't have to win a fight in order for bullies to think twice next time.
- Word will get around that you aren't an easy target.

ANOTHER STRATEGY:

Most bullies aren't willing to risk anything, so: Raise the stakes on them past where they are comfortable continuing.

THESE ARE RISKY RESPONSES. ONLY USE THESE IF YOU HAVE TO.

POSTURING 101

There are lots of ways to posture to let people know you mean business. If you don't have a stance yet, try starting with this:

- relax, but don't go limp
- lower your forehead & look up through your eyebrows
- put your weight slightly forward
- drop your shoulders
- drop your focus into your lower belly, not your head
- putting up fists too early can get you decked unnecessarily
- picture wolves in your mind, or cornered cats or something
- imagine shooting literal icy daggers from your eyes
- believe you are not afraid, and they will too
- breathe, and relax

RAISING THE STAKES AS A DE-ESCALATION STRATEGY

** if they're intoxicated or trans-panicking, this will not work!*

- This can be a bluff, but it's best if you believe it yourself. Tell yourself that your life is on the line, you are at rock bottom, and they all have more to lose than you do.
- If you can push them past where they were comfortable engaging, they will start de-escalation for you. Your goal is for them to try to laugh it off, or to tell you to calm down.

they call you a slur (low stakes verbal assault)
don't return an insult — try something like "Fite Me." (high stakes verbal escalation)
they're shoving you (light violence)
don't shove back — try a punch or takedown (medium violence)
they're already punching you (honorable fighting)
try eye raking, grabbing fingers, whatever seems like it would hurt (dirty fighting)

Don't worry about winning fairly, or even winning at all. This strategy works by making a statement that everyone else will remember next time, *which happens even if you lose.*

- Don't continue the fight longer than necessary — once you make your statement, you can run away.
- Escalate *decisively*. If you don't escalate fast enough, the bully will feel comfortable about the pace, and you will lose badly.

You only have to fight back once to reduce your bullying forever. Word will get around that you're not an easy target.

REAL TALK:

Trans women* are often dependent on their aggressors for housing, protection, and financial stability, or have a transactional relationship with them.

Trans women* may need to continue these relationships after the altercation is over.

Tasers, mace, & guns can be options for other sorts of situations, but they won't be covered in this study guide for this reason.

Background paintings: inoPoGu

CHAPTER 4
SAFETY IN NUMBERS

illustrated by GAIA WXYZ

Really, this is the best thing to do, always

The BEST way to avoid danger is to appear dangerous

And, for whatever reason, adding just one friend to your side — even if they are small and unarmed — does more to intimidate your enemies than any weapon or tough demeanor.

STRATEGY:

* ***Make a few good friends.*** Play to your enemies' subconscious fear about messing with packs of people.

All of the situations in previous chapters work better if it appears that you have someone backing you up.

* Except in pre-negotiated and trained scenarios, even your best friend ***WILL NOT*** step in for you. But this strategy still works as a bluff: they only need to ***LOOK*** like they ***MIGHT*** have your back.

So, what are concrete ways to make allies out of acquaintances?

TRY ATTACHING YOURSELF TO TOUGHER OR FIERCER PEOPLE

A) Build familiarity by showing up for other people in small ways, until they just stand by you without thinking about it

B) Make yourself useful by doing people small favors — like doing their homework for them — so that they have at least a little stake in your survival

Think beyond just hiding behind big dudes: having a white cis woman on your side may make you appear to be much more formidable, ***especially*** if you are being bullied by an institution (i.e. school administration, hospital staff, etc.).

PREPARE YOUR PEOPLE

Your allies won't know you're being attacked until you tell them, ***even if you think your attacker is super obvious.***

Try to put your friends on alert ***before*** an incident breaks out.

WARNING:
Try to make sure your "allies" also know you have teeth, ***so they don't start bullying you themselves!***

WARNING:
Don't expect your allies to step in if violence starts. ***They're a tool for you to bluff with, nothing more.***

TRAIN & HANG OUT TOGETHER

If you're lucky enough to have a crew of trans women*, you can look out for each other in more real ways than allies can.

* Check in on each other.
* Make sure everyone gets home safe!
* Make sure everyone has what they need in life.

And train self-defense together!

In an actual fight, ***you can only trust the people who you have already seen fight***, so:

* find boxing gloves, dummy knives, or just your hands
* form a weekly training group (monthly isn't enough)
* teach yourselves with YouTube, no gym necessary
* keep it safe, supportive, and accessible

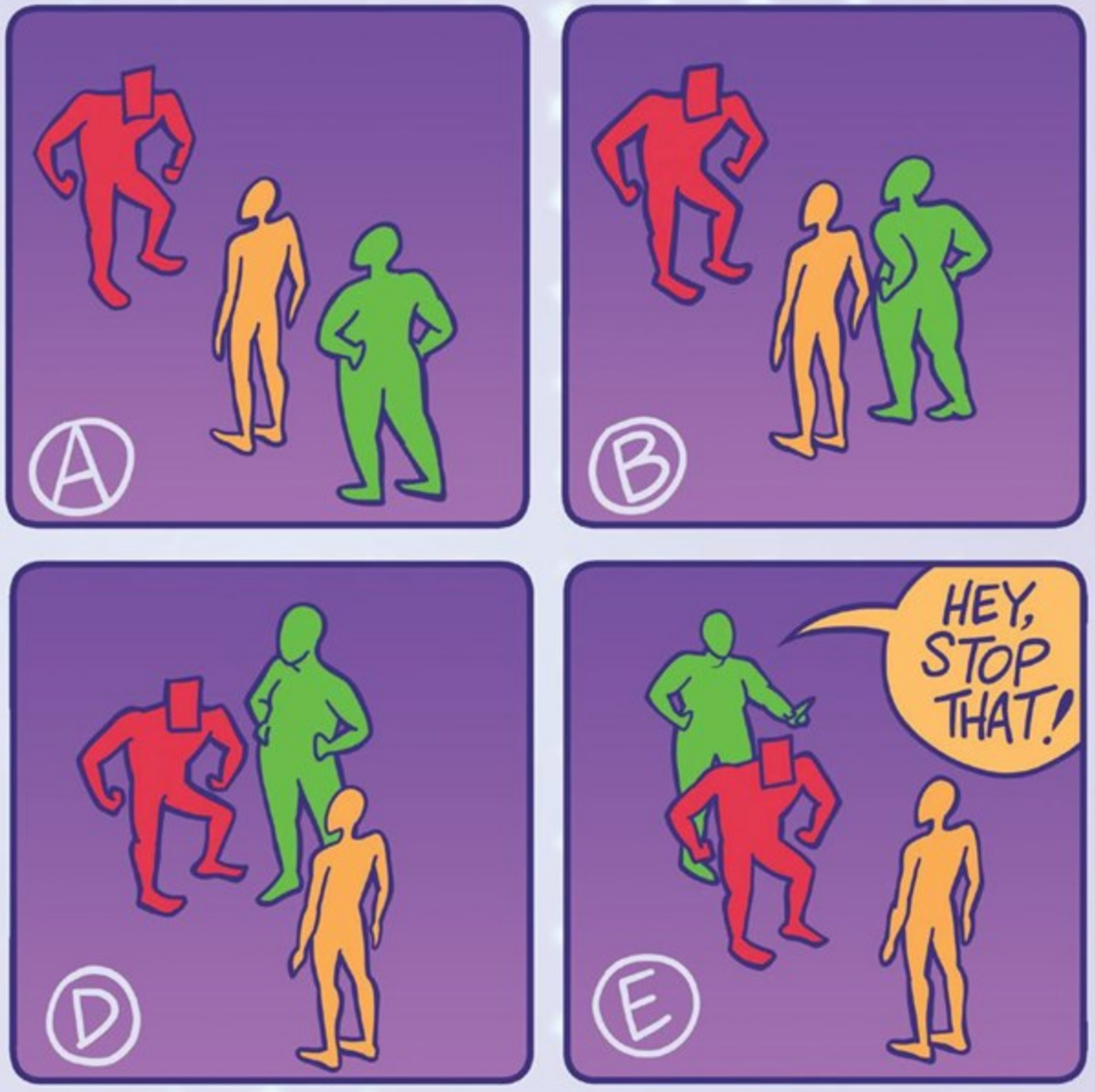
And then, whenever you need to go somewhere dangerous, ask your training family to go with you!

PRACTICE YOUR POSITIONING

* Let them ***SEE*** your numbers
* ***Don't trust one person to handle it alone!***
* A practiced, organized response is ***intimidating,*** even if it's just positional

Where to put yourself when someone else is being harassed:

BULLY
VICTIM
YOU



PRACTICE THE DIFFERENCE:

* Roleplay a simple harassment scenario a few ways, to feel the difference.
* Interview your "bully" about how each position felt, so you'll know when to use which positioning

REAL TALK:

Trans people can have a difficult relationship to their bodies, in a way that isn't helped by body-positive compliments.

Trans women* are often carrying trauma that affects how they can train & who they can train with.

Even well-intentioned & highly trained cisgender or AFAB-trans instructors can do more harm than good, so trans women's* self-defense is probably best as a peer-to-peer study.

Background paintings: inoPoGu

Chapter 5:
INTIMATE PARTNER DE-ESCALATION

... for when you don't want to make out anymore for whatever reason, but you don't necessarily want to bash their head in with an ashtray & jump out a window

Illustrations: Jacky Radl

QUESTION:
Do you rely on your intimate partners for other things besides sex? [HINTS: money, housing, security]
What happens if you defend yourself from your partner using strong language, punches, or weapons?

ANOTHER STRATEGY:

Take back some personal space without tipping them off that you're actually preparing for them to flip out. Gentle techniques are easier to justify using early & often, and hopefully less likely to trigger them into a panic.

Use a limb to frame your bodies apart:

Wedge your forearm vertically against their collar bone.

- keep your elbow towards the inside of their chest
  - keep your shoulder low
    - they won't be able to get any closer without also pushing you away

- try cupping the back of their skull to keep it feeling "intimate," while also giving you even more control
  - you can do this with both arms at once, or even switch back and forth if they squirm around

Once you have a few inches of space, try talking it out.

IF YOU'RE LYING DOWN:

Get your shin against their hips.

Use your shin to push yourself back a bit.

Don't try pushing them away, just scoot your own butt out.

Variation:

Put a knee across their stomach, with your foot on the outside.

- MMA fighters demo these moves in detail on YouTube. Search for "Collar Tie," "Half Butterfly," and "Z-Guard."

If there's a chance they will go into a violent panic when you start to verbally address your discomfort, definitely first secure one of these subtly dominant positions (collar tie / half butterfly / flip them over and get on top, etc.).

If they get mean and you want more space, having these positions first will allow you to more easily transition to: scooting away, standing up, kicking, or even Brazilian Jiu Jitsu submission holds.

TRAIN IT! Please please please, train it.

- Competent grappling takes a lot of practice! Especially if you're not starting from a "Missionary" position.
- It's not enough just to read this zine, or to rehearse these moves only in your head.
- Find someone you feel safe training with. Rehearse weekly until these moves become instinctive.
- Consider that many people also study Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. You have to be better than them, so you have to train more often than them.

To everyone who is holding on by your fingernails, we want you to know that you are not alone. We see you and want to make sure you survive another night.

#QUEERSNEVERDIE

We don't know of all the safer places to train, we can't vouch for anyone else, and this list will be well out-of-date by the time you read this, but some Instagram accounts with trans-women*-friendly classes in 2019 were:

@TransFighters (Oakland, CA) ← that's us
@HaymakerChi (Chicago, IL)
@PopGymBK (Brooklyn, NY)
@DegenderettesCBus (Columbus, OH)
@PrairieCommunityDefense (Edmonton, AB)

Feel like donating?
Check us out at traction-project.org.

TransFighters and Traction Project
are also hosts of Queer Bash,
a unique friendly tournament by
and for trans and queer grapplers.
Photo: Adina Butler / IGP Photo 2018

Advance Praise:

"It reminds us all that self-defense doesn't happen in the gym or in an action movie fantasy, but in real life within structures of oppression."
– Haymaker Gym, Chicago

"Offers unique insight to many undervalued aspects of self-defense ... A perfect fit for folks just beginning their journey into self-defense."
– Prairie Community Defense, Edmonton

"These moves work, but must be practiced often to work."
– Fallon Fox, retired professional MMA fighter

"This is amazing and much needed! Practical and motivational advice for Trans and GNC people ... to protect ourselves and the community."
– St. James Infirmary Clinic, San Francisco

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